

RUTGERS

THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

Phone: [REDACTED]

FAX: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
New Brunswick, NJ 08903, USA

Telephone: [REDACTED]

September 2, 1993

Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network
400 N. Capitol Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001

Re: *Question*

Dears Sirs:

My cable company (TKR cable) has decided to deprive its customers of access to C-Span during the period from 4 p.m. to 1 a.m. I am angered by this but see no way to fight it. For your information, I enclose a rather self-explanatory —but, I suspect, totally useless— letter that I have sent to the mayor of Piscataway, NJ, where I reside. I have underlined the parts where I explicitly mention C-Span.

In case you happen to have any suggestions on other possible courses of action, I would appreciate hearing from you.

And may I take this opportunity to congratulate you for the excellence of your programming, especially the interviews so intelligently conducted by Brian Lamb.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

cc: Willie Vereen

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New Brunswick, NJ 08903, USA

Telephone: [REDACTED]

September 2, 1993

Mayor Ted Light
Municipal Complex
455 Hoes Lane
Piscataway, NJ 08854

Re: *Cable T.V.*

Dear Mr. Mayor:

I am a long time resident of Piscataway, where my wife and I have lived since 1979. I have just returned here after being absent for one year, and I have noticed with great dismay that the services provided by our local cable company, which already were of rather poor quality one year ago, have become much worse now, in the sense that for no justifiable reason, and without bothering to find out what we, the users, feel on this matter, the cable company is cancelling some of the best channels available. And I am very surprised to find out that our city is planning to renew the contract with this company for another three years. I would have hoped that, in view of their appalling record of ignoring users' preferences, and their arrogant behavior as a monopolist who does not seem to care to even find out what its customers want, this company would not have had their contract renewed for a single day, let alone three years.

During the year that I spent away from Piscataway, living in Minneapolis, MN, I was able to appreciate what a good cable company can be like, and the range of services that such a company can provide. We had Bravo, that this company of ours never even seems to have considered, perhaps because they think it is too high-brow for the average resident of Piscataway. (Once, a long time ago, I did call the company to ask whether there was any chance that they might add Bravo to their list of channels, and what one could do, as a user, to urge them to do so. They basically told me to forget about it.) We had two C-Spans in Minneapolis, whereas here, until a few days ago, we used to have only one. This was bad already, but our cable company seems to think that even one C-Span is too much. So now, in an action that I regard as an intolerable insult to all the people of Piscataway that consider themselves thinking persons with an interest in public affairs, the cable company has relegated the only C-Span station that we used to have to the period from 1 a.m. to 4 p.m., which means, for instance, that I will no longer have a chance to see programs such as Booknotes, which is one of the very best TV shows available to people with intellectual interests. And they have compounded the outrage by giving us, as a substitute for C-Span on Channel 6, the cable company's own channel, that carries mostly commercials that I am sure will interest nobody and that serve no useful purpose for the user or for the community. As I am sure you know, Mr. Mayor, Piscataway is a town many of whose residents are associated with Rutgers University, AT&T, the IEEE, Bellcore, and other firms or organizations where information processing and intellectual work is of paramount importance. I think it is very sad for a community such as ours to be held prisoner by a cable company that thinks its customers are morons, that has monopolistic control over what channels we can watch, and uses that controlling position to

deny us anything that might interest a moderately intelligent person, with callous disregard for customers' preferences. The image that a community projects is shaped by lots of details, and the kind of cable TV that its people have access to is certainly one of them. By going along with the type of cable TV that we have grown accustomed to here we are in fact agreeing to be perceived as a community where culture does not count for much, and this is not how I would like people to think of the place where I live.

I would like to urge you, Mr. Mayor, to exercise leadership on this issue, and lead us, residents of Piscataway, so that we can stand up to the cable company and demand that, for a change, they either consult us on our preferences or get out of this town, so that we can look for a company that might be more responsive to our interests. This company, as far as I can tell, has never asked the customers what they want. I do not know if they have a legal obligation to do so, and I presume that they do not, but in any case it would have been nice if they had done it. And, since they obviously have no intention of ever doing so, I would urge you, Mr. Mayor, to fill this gap. Perhaps you, or someone from the city government, could send a questionnaire or provide some other way for us Piscataway residents to express our preferences. And if the answers to this questionnaire show a very high level of dissatisfaction with the cable service, as I am sure they will, then I would very much like to see the city government confront the cable company and undertake serious collective negotiations in the name of all of us. I, for one, would be delighted to cancel my subscription to this company, if this was done as part of a general movement—a "users' strike," if you wish—to put pressure on the company to provide better services. Unfortunately, if I alone were to cancel my subscription, that would have no effect. I am not afforded any chance to go to another company, so the only way is for someone to represent people like me so we can overcome the collective action problem confronting us, and it seems to me that nobody is in a better position than our elected mayor to take the lead on this.

These days, the cable company is asking people to write to their congressmen and senators regarding the new law regulating cable services. Based on their past record, I see no reason to trust this particular company, and when they invoke these new regulations as the reasons for the changes they have made to the detriment of the users, I do not find these explanations satisfactory. For example, they have not provided a reasonable justification for the near elimination of C-Span. (My wife and I called TKR several times to ask them why they had done such a thing, but they kept putting us on hold and, after waiting up to 20 minutes, we gave up. This, by itself, is already scandalous. A cable company should have enough people answering their phones so that a customer who wishes to ask a question can get through reasonably fast.) And they have also cancelled the deservedly popular Comedy Channel, again for no discernible reason. I would rather suspect that they are deliberately making their services worse in order to scare the users and get them to support their campaign against the new regulations.

I stress that my complaint in no way belongs in the category of "customer complaining against Congress for the harm it has done to our beloved, trusted and well-meaning cable company by burdening it with unbearable regulation." I am not a believer in government regulation as a panacea, and I would in principle have given serious thought to any company's exhortation that we write to our congressmen objecting to burdensome regulatory laws, provided only that the company's past record had given me reason to trust its word. However, in this case, while I don't know enough about the new regulations to be able to judge whether they are as bad as the cable company claims, I do know enough about TKR Cable not to believe a single word they say, and I know that, even with those regulations, there is no reason for treating the users the way this company has been treating us. I have therefore come to the conclusion that it is against *them*, rather than against Congress, that my complaint has to be directed. However distasteful I find government regulation as a general guiding principle for social organization, in this case I find myself

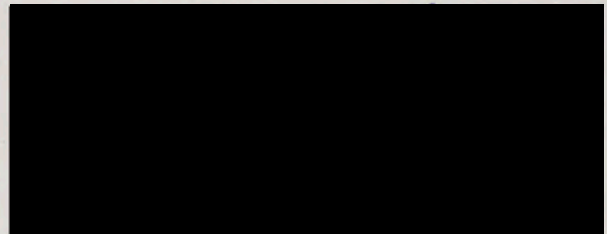
September 2, 1993

P.3

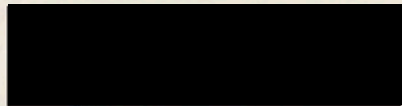
wishing for some government agency —federal, state, or municipal— to step in and represent me and other users like me. My only —but extremely serious— complaint against “government” in this case is that it has not taken a firm stand against companies such as TKR. I wish and hope, Mr. Mayor, that in the future you will do what good government is supposed to do, namely, represent the people in situations where collective action is required.

So let me conclude by reiterating my suggestion that you take the lead in actively representing us and demanding that the cable company provide a better selection of channels. A restoration of C-Span to a full 24 hour schedule would be a first step in the right direction, albeit a very small one, which would still have to be followed by many other improvements. If this is not done, then I would urge you to oppose as strongly as you can renewal of the contract for three years. And, if it is true, as I have heard, that the cable company is actually demanding a 15 year contract, then this should most certainly be totally out of the question. I cannot believe that my city government really wishes to put me in a position where I have no choice but to go along with the deplorable quality of our cable service, but if I ever come to the conclusion that it does, then I would no longer feel this is *my* city government, adequately representing *me*, and I would seek to use my vote, and to encourage my friends to use theirs, to bring about a better alternative.

Sincerely,



Cc: Public Utilities Commission, C-Span



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